

The arts and the power of an individual voice

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(NASAA)

This keynote address was presented at the annual conference of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) on Oct. 6, 2012, in Washington, D.C., and is excerpted here with permission. The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies is the membership organization that unites, represents and serves the nation's state and jurisdictional arts agencies. Each of the 56 states and jurisdictions has created an agency to support excellence in and access to the arts.

As we all know, over the past 10 years, two extended recessions have strangled revenues from state sales tax, income tax and property tax. Deficit budgets at all levels of government – as well as doubts that government programs are effectively addressing some of our society's most stubborn economic and social problems – have triggered a broad-based philosophical reassessment and close scrutiny of every government investment, including public support for the arts ...

For fiscal year 2013, 31 state arts agency budgets are increasing and 11 more are holding at the 2012 level. While not every state has a billion and a half-dollar surplus like North Dakota, I heard the feeling expressed in more than one session at this Assembly that things seem to be turning around.

But whether they are or not, a NASAA Assembly is a special time, when we gather together, not only to learn from each other and from colleagues with expertise beyond our own, but to remind each other why we continue to do the work that we do, and to celebrate our collective commitment.

A collective commitment

And what is our collective commitment? Certainly it is to broaden and deepen participation in the arts, certainly it is to provide the public benefits that return from investing in arts activities, and certainly it is to ensure that every child enjoys and profits from the

benefits of arts learning. And here we should note that learning through sensory imagery – along with numeracy and literacy – is necessary to enable students to learn everything else.

Those of us who advocate for public support of the arts have in common the belief that the benefits of the arts are so important that they are a public good – when anyone gains from the arts, we all gain, and when anyone is deprived of the opportunity to experience, learn and appreciate the arts, we all suffer a loss. A commitment to public support for the arts is premised on belief in the principle of equity in opportunity, of basic fairness, which is a foundational value of American democracy.

I think the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies bond is so strong, that our members work so hard as volunteers and professionals, that you made the extra effort to be here with your colleagues because deep down you are wedded to some of the values that define American democracy. I want to highlight another.

The power of an individual voice

The poet William Carlos Williams wrote, "It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." Well, we need to ask, what is found there, in poems and in art, the lack of which is worse than deadly?

It is an individual voice.

As a poet in the schools for the Kansas Arts Commission, I learned that my young students could not distinguish between images they had seen on television a few days earlier and their own dreams. Without practicing their own imaginative language, without learning to tell stories in visual images, without learning to play an instrument, they were well on their way to becoming the prey of any picture



Jonathan Katz

on a screen, any message delivered in music, any image in any medium selling a product or an idea.

An individual voice learns what makes it unique, what it is able to say, what it wants to say. When an individual voice recognizes another voice as individual, we call it empathy. An individual voice can join a majority or dissent. An individual voice can reflect on what it said in the past and can take issue with, while respecting, what it understands is

another individual voice. In *E pluribus unum* ("Out of many, one"), the pluribus is made of individual voices.

Preserving "the speech that sings"

Take heart and gain courage from knowing that your stewardship of public support for the arts is preserving the individual voices of our people and, most importantly, our children. Their ability to express themselves through the arts will give them and our nation the gift of the speech that sings, the speech that doesn't just find beauty, but creates it, the speech that insists there are many colors in the rainbow, the speech that curses and the speech that blesses, the speech that dramatizes the tragedy and the divinity in our lives, the speech that you say with your tongue, your eyes, your ears, your entire body, the speech that will put the shape of our heritage and our ambition in the public square, and will make a space for contemplation and discourse, the speech that says here is how speech works, the speech that will outlast us.

In the democracy we dream of, this is what the arts are and what we do with them, and the bond and the beauty of the family we are, here assembled, is that we are the ones who have answered the call to work together on that dream.

Study shows interest in arts predicts social responsibility

If you sing, dance, draw, or act – and especially if you watch others do so – you probably have an altruistic streak, according to a study by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

People with an active interest in the arts contribute more to society than those with little or no such interest, the researchers found. They analyzed arts exposure, defined as attendance at museums and dance, music, opera and theater events; and arts expression, defined as making or performing art.

"Even after controlling for age, race and education, we found that participation in the arts, especially as audience, predicted civic engagement, tolerance and altruism," said Kelly LeRoux, assistant professor of public administration at UIC and principal investigator on the study.

In contrast to earlier studies, Generation X respondents were found to be more civically engaged than older people.

LeRoux's data came from the General Social Survey, conducted since 1972 by the National Data Program for the Sciences. A national sample of 2,765 randomly selected adults participated.

The researchers measured participation in neighborhood associations, church and religious organizations, civic and fraternal organizations, sports groups, charitable organizations, political parties, professional associations and trade unions.

"If policymakers are concerned about a decline in community life, the arts shouldn't be disregarded as a means to promote an active citizenry," LeRoux said. "Our positive findings could strengthen the case for government support for the arts."

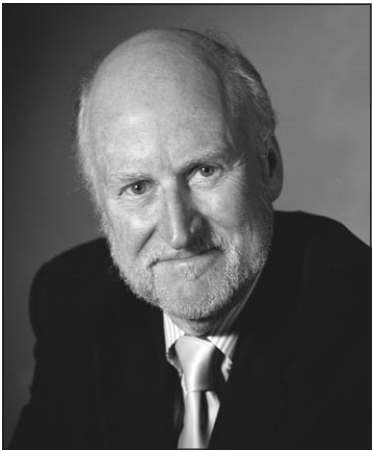
For details, visit www.uic.edu.

NEA chairman steps down

Rocco Landesman plans to step down as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts at the end of December.

"My intention has always been to serve one term, and we have been able to accomplish more than I had ever thought possible: sparking a national movement around creative placemaking, forging significant relationships with other federal agencies, creating an unprecedented healing arts partnership with the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, and increasing both the scope and impact of our research office.

"We have continued to support and



Rocco Landesman

strengthen the entire spectrum of arts in this country, and we have been able to expand the national conversation through convenings, traditional media, and new technology. I am proud and honored to have served alongside such an amazing group of dedicated public servants.

"The time has come for me to become a cliché: I turned 65, am going to retire, and cannot wait to spend more time in Miami Beach."

NEA Senior Deputy Chairman Joan Shigekawa will serve as the acting head of the agency until a permanent successor is confirmed.

Podcasts for teachers (from previous page)

- Lesson 6, "Lost," about writing a poem that responds to another poem (in this case, David Waggoner's "Lost")
- Lesson 7, "Delight Song," about the form of a list poem, and inspired by "The Delight Song of Tsoai-talee" by N. Scott Momaday
- Lesson 8, "The Power of Circles," based on the poems of Black Elk and other Native American authors
- Lesson 9, "The Hand," gleaned from a collection of Pueblo poetry called *Many Winters*
- Lesson 10, "The Pantoum," a 12-line poem that relies on repetition for its power

According to the Missoula Writing Collaborative, the podcasts help foster the social interaction that occurs when a group of students works together and learns skills such as critical observation, sharing ideas and expressing "the un-addressed issues that cannot be accessed without an atmosphere of safety, inclusion, and professional examples toward achievement. When children are in this atmosphere they learn better methods of communication and the importance of everyone taking part."

The podcasts are available for classrooms across Montana and for the public on a variety of websites, including Humanities Montana, the Montana Arts Council, and YouTube.com (search for Sheryl Noethe).



New NEA report maps the arts

How do you measure how art works – on people, on communities, or on society? It's a broad question, and the National Endowment for the Arts offers an ambitious plan to "map" the arts to better understand and measure this complex, dynamic system.

How Art Works describes the agency's five-year research agenda, framed and informed by a groundbreaking "system map" and measurement model. This report builds on a wide-ranging literature review and nationwide consultations with experts representing government, academia, philanthropy and industry.

The report is available at www.nea.gov/research/How-Art-Works/index.html.

The NEA has also updated and revised *How the United States Funds the Arts*, now in its fourth edition. This report gives a comprehensive overview of the diverse network of public and private funders that directly and indirectly support the arts in the U.S. Download a copy at www.nea.gov/pub/how.pdf.